Hiroshi Sugimoto Transforms the Motionless

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Abstract

While the average contemporary photographer creates a snapshot in time, Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948) is unique in his ability to create life where there is none. Sugimoto photographed scenes of dioramas from natural history museums across America. Through his technical and artistic skill, as well as his ability to play off of the viewer's expectation of photography, Sugimoto's series, *Dioramas*, 1976-2014, are full of life even though the subjects themselves are not alive. From its inception in 1839, photography has been a tool to document the world as it is known and typically captures the image of a person, place, or object in situ. Sugimoto takes advantage of the viewer's pre-conceived notion that the photograph must have been taken as it happened. The way Sugimoto frames the scene along with careful, intentional viewpoints creates an image that puts the viewer at the scene at what seems to be the actual moment in time. The artist's use of black and white creates contrast and starkness within the images, which drifts towards timelessness, reckoning back to the early days of photography before color photography was introduced. In real life, the visitor experiences a fabricated scene, but Sugimoto's photographs make the scene seem more alive than in person. In *Dioramas,* Sugimoto creates a sense of movement within the photographs by using a snapshot aesthetic with the edges of the scene cut off, by choosing to print in black and white, and by playing off viewers' assumptions that a photographer is a documentarian.

Keywords: Art History, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Dioramas, Photography

Hiroshi Sugimoto Transforms the Motionless

Almost everyone has experienced a diorama firsthand at some point in their lives. As young children, the dollhouse and the model train set have long been a staple of the childhood playroom. Children can be found playing make-believe in imaginary worlds based on miniature representations from the physical world. As adults, dioramas continue to be present in the form of architectural models and natural habitats as seen in natural history museums. Dioramas, typically "reproduced in three dimensions by placing objects, figures, etc., in front of a painted background",[1] represent the culmination of artistry, craftsmanship, history, science and recreate a scene from our world. The audience, both young and old, can witness a scene frozen in time, and start to imagine the story taking place behind the glass. But what happens when a photograph of the scene is taken out of its context? Hiroshi Sugimoto may have asked this same question of himself and his audience as he began photographing dioramas from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Sugimoto's series, *Dioramas, 1976-2014*, asks viewers to contemplate concepts such as time, history, and the very definition of what a photograph is meant to represent. According to John Yau, "*Dioramas* define the viewer as a ghost wandering through time, a stranger looking at the history of the world."[2] At first glance, any one of Sugimoto's photographs from *Dioramas* may appear to be merely an image documenting a scene

1. Dictionary.com, accessed March 10, 2022, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/diorama.
2. John Yau, "Time Halted: The Photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto," *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 33, No. 5 (September/October 2004): 12.

in nature. However, upon closer inspection, the viewer realizes the images are of artificial recreations of an imaginative scene. Through his technical and artistic skill, as well as his ability to play off of the viewer's expectation of photography, Sugimoto's series, *Dioramas*, are full of life even though the subjects themselves are not alive.

Background on Dioramas

Sugimoto was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1948 and came to the United States to study in California. After moving to New York in the 1970's, he began visiting the American Museum of Natural History and photographing the natural habitat exhibitions. He began his series, *Dioramas,* in 1976 and continued to work on the series for the last four decades. Sugimoto "found a way to see the world as a camera does"[3] and sought to bring new life to the inanimate creatures frozen in their artificial scenes. The subject matter ranges from prehistoric man to a wide variety of wildlife, and from forests to the ocean floor. All of the elements, such as the plants, rocks, and water, are entirely manmade and enclosed behind glass in a climate controlled environment to preserve the scene. Most of the animals, if not artificial, have been taxidermied and are surrounded by a painted backdrop. Sugimoto claims he is exploring the theme of lost humans and lost nature, and that the series represents his "idealistic visions of nature."[4] He is imagining what the natural world might return to if humans became extinct, yet he is also documenting some scenes that have already been lost.

Sugimoto's process, while not new, influences his unique aesthetic. Sugimoto employs a large format box camera and a long exposure to capture the background and foreground in great

3. Artist's website. Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Sugimotohiroshi," accessed April 20, 2019, https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-54.
4. Video interview. Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Hiroshi Sugimoto: Four Decades of Photographing Dioramas," American Museum of Natural History, filmed June 4, 2014. Video, 0:40.

detail. The *Dioramas* series is printed entirely in black and white using the gelatin silver print process. The black and white photographs have a wide tonal range, resulting in rich, warm grays, adjacent to crisp whites, neighboring sleek, cool grays. Sugimoto utilizes a unique style of printing which "involves studying the silver reactions, the colors of the metal as silver, and the surface of ink tones."[5] The gelatin silver process allows the images to be rendered crisply and with precise detail. Ansel Adams also used a large format camera to capture textured details and produced silver gelatin prints to create enduring images. Adams' photographic fundamentals included "visualization, sharp focus, precise rendering of textures, and the correct relationship of tonal values."[6] Adams' photograph, *Yosemite Valley from Inspiration Point, Winter, Yosemite National Park, California*, ca. 1937, shows rich texture in both the foreground and background (fig. 1). Additionally, Sugimoto uses specialty film and paper, proving that he is equally a craftsman and a technician. Sugimoto's use of black and white and mastery of the gelatin silver print process have become a trademark of his style over the years.

Revival of the Lifeless

Although a viewer could quickly dismiss Sugimoto's photographs by assuming that there is nothing interesting about the subject matter or that little skill was involved since the subjects were not moving; there is much more than meets the eye. Each photograph in the collection evokes an untold narrative to be imagined by the viewer and seeks to go beyond the counterfeit reality of the staged scene.

First, we must consider our understanding of the role of photography in the world's history. From its inception in 1839, photography has been a tool to document the world as it is known and typically captures the image of a person, place, or object in situ. The evolution of

5. Susan Sollins, *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-first Century 2* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 118.
6. Mary Street Alinder, *Group f.64* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 158.

photography starts with portraiture, cataloging objects, travel and war photography, and documenting survey expeditions, then grows to social documentary and photojournalism. Even today, viewers have come to expect that a photograph records a moment in time and an event or scene that actually took place. The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson insisted that a photograph must be taken at the exact moment in order to capture the best movement, lighting, and composition of a scene. In his book, *The Decisive Moment,* Cartier-Bresson asserts that "photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event,"[7] which can be seen in his photograph, *Behind the Gare St. Lazare, Paris*, 1932 (fig. 2). Social documentarian photographers and photojournalists have based their careers on capturing the right image at the right time. Conversely, Sugimoto plays off the assumption that viewers believe the photo happened at a decisive moment in time and is therefore "no longer bound by the constraints of time and space."[8] Looking at *Manatee, 1994* (fig. 3), the viewer sees a manatee and baby, presumably underwater, caught in the midst of a playful swim. The creatures are sandwiched by the ocean floor and the underside of the water's edge in a seemingly shallow underwater scene. The way the light is reflected through the water makes the image appear as if it had been taken on a bright, sunny day. Sugimoto takes advantage of the viewer's pre-conceived notion that the photograph must have been taken as it happened. He plays off this assumption and more easily passes off the photograph as one of a living manatee. The subjects were not alive when the photo was taken, so there was no movement to capture. Sugimoto creates a sense of movement with the help of the viewer's assumptions.

7. Sarah Hermanson, "Henri Cartier-Bresson," in MoMA, Vol. 3, No. 6, September 200, page 31.
8. Yau, 11.

Secondly, Sugimoto's choice to use black and white photography as his medium helps to convince viewers that each photograph captures a moment in time. The contrast and starkness of the images suggest an almost timeless photograph, reckoning back to the early days of photography before color photography was introduced in the 1950's. In *Birds of South Georgia, 2012*, the black and white imagery connects to the viewer's sense that evokes a time from the past (fig 4). In this instance, that time could have been seventy or one hundred years ago, but if one cannot associate a date with the event, it drifts toward timelessness. Yau supports this idea and believes that "in Sugimoto's photographs, the past hasn't vanished and the future doesn't eradicate. Rather, the viewer is floating in a world of halted time."[9] The contrast of black and white feathers of the birds translates well to the medium. A color photograph of the exhibit, or seeing the exhibit in person, may not possess the same ageless quality (fig. 5). Sugimoto uses a black and white palette to his advantage.

Additionally, Sugimoto's understanding of photography as his medium strengthens his ability to reanimate his inanimate subjects. A person visiting a brick and mortar museum and experiencing the dioramas firsthand will immediately read the scene as posed. As one moves through the exhibit, the creatures behind the glass do not move, and it is obvious that the scene has been manufactured to create a fictitious moment in time. Kevin Riordan claims "the dioramas do not move, though in Sugimoto's photographs *they seem to.*"[10] In a typical exhibit, "the impression of spatial depth is produced by the light curvature of the rear wall."[11] Artificial lighting in the exhibit mimics natural daylight and brings the inanimate creatures to the

9. Yau, 11.
10. In italics are Riordan's original text. Kevin Riordan, "Hiroshi Sugimoto and the Photography of Theatre," *Performance Research,* vol. 20, no. 2 (April 2015): 102.
11. Durs Grünbein and Daniel Slager, "Childhood in the Diorama," in *Grand Street*, no. 70, Against Nature (Spring, 2002): 37.

foreground. The painted background in *Birds of South Georgia, 2012* reads as a natural formation in Sugimoto's photograph (fig. 4). Photography flattens the space and depth of the image. Sugimoto uses this to his advantage to create images with sharp detail in two-dimensional form. In real life, the visitor experiences a fabricated scene, but Sugimoto's photographs make the scene seem more alive than in person.

Third and finally, Sugimoto's artistic approach to photography lends to the sense that he was a witness to the action of the scene. We know this cannot be true when considering *Permian Land, 1992* (fig. 6). At first, the way the image is framed calls to mind the snapshot aesthetic. When photography first made its way to the hands of non-professional, amateur photographers, images at the time were not carefully crafted. They were taken spontaneously and candidly, often with edges of the scene cut off. Sugimoto recreates this aesthetic in a way that is reminiscent of the snapshot and his "work seems to gesture outside of its frame."[12] However, upon closer inspection, the viewer recognizes the subjects as dinosaurs, a pair of extinct dimetrodons. It appears as if Sugimoto has captured the dinosaurs at just the right moment, as they confront a reptile emerging from the water. According to Toby Kamps, the dinosaurs depicted in the image date back to the Paleozoic era, 290- 248 million years ago.[13] Sugimoto could not have been present to document this scene. The way that Sugimoto frames the image and the angle from which he takes the photograph suggests that "we are invisible, unthreatening viewers floating in the air, viewing the different species in their environment."[14] While Sugimoto is not responsible

12. Riordan, 104.
13. Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* (New York: Oxford Press University, 2017), 170.
14. Yau, 12.
15. Toby Kamps, S*mall World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 7.

for creating the scene itself, he is credited for composing the photographs in a way that inspires viewers to believe that he was present at the time of the action. In *Permian Land*, *1992,* Sugimoto's perspective, composition and framing of the scene suggest he may have been alive one hundred and fifty million years ago.

Evaluation

Some viewers seeing Sugimoto's *Diorama* series for the first time may be underwhelmed. The subject matter is not controversial nor does it provoke the viewer. As compared to other contemporary artists, there is nothing shocking to reveal. There are no political statements to be made. However, to assess Sugimoto's work based solely on these criteria would be a mistake. Sugimoto's photographs transport the viewer to an imaginary time and place nestled into the fabric of our history. He successfully creates the illusion that he, as the photographer, was present in these fabricated scenes and that the animals were alive at the time of the photograph. Sugimoto creates images that transform a static scene to one with movement, full of life. His work encapsulates the dioramas as "intrinsically morbid. To arrest life, they must necessarily kill it (literally when taxidermy is involved)."[15] The dioramas themselves evoke a sense of both life and death at the same time but also "creates a kind of immortality. Their worlds and inhabitants, forever poised, may be dead, but they will also live beyond us."[16]

With ghostly eeriness, Sugimoto breathes life into the arrested scenes of the dioramas. Sugimoto plays off the viewer's pre-conceived notion that a photograph must document an occurrence that actually happened. While the dioramas do exist in actual three-dimensional form, and Sugimoto was present to document the scene in situ, the reality is that the forms and elements have all been manufactured to create a historical representation of living forms that are

16. Kamps, 7.

no longer alive. Sugimoto's artistic approach and mastery of his craft contribute to the feeling that these photographs indeed possess a sense of movement and life. The viewer is tricked into believing that the photos are real. In fact, the subjects are real in the sense that they *do* exist. However, the subjects are not alive, and there is no movement to capture. It is merely a scene that has been created and manufactured, to imitate and preserve the subjects and natural habitat of a specific time, past or present. Even as the dioramas were intended to preserve some of nature's finest habitats, Sugimoto is, in a way, preserving and archiving the dioramas. As the exhibits age and the novelty of the diorama continues to decline, some museums have already started to retire these once popular relics. Sugimoto's work possesses a quality of life and movement, even though his subjects are lifeless.

In summary, what appears to be a static image of an artificial scene within a diorama comes to life in Sugimoto's photographs. Viewers may assume that a photographer catches the action while it happens, and Sugimoto uses that assumption to allow them to come to the conclusion that the photographer was documenting living subjects. Sugimoto's black and white images allude to a moment frozen in time, even if that moment cannot be pinpointed. The medium of photography may be the perfect way to immortalize these dioramas since a photograph flattens space and is more believable as a two-dimensional image. Sugimoto's photographs are more alive than the dioramas themselves. Some may see Sugimoto's photographs as merely documenting a scene that has been constructed by others, yet there is a sense of vitality to be found because of Sugimoto's technique and artistic approach. The way Sugimoto frames the scene along with careful, intentional viewpoints creates an image that lands the viewer in the middle of the action at what seems to be the actual moment in time. Sugimoto's *Dioramas* seduce the viewer into an imaginary world that requires in-depth examination.

Illustrations

Figure 1, Adams, Ansel, *Yosemite Valley from Inspiration Point, Winter, Yosemite National Park, California,* Gelatin silver print, 1937, (Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Ansel Adams Archive) https://library-artstor-org.proxy.ulib.uits.iu.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38057722.

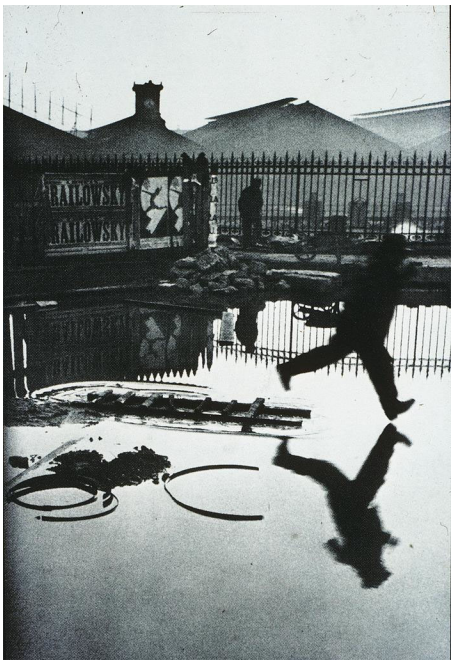

Figure 2, Cartier-Bresson, Henri, *Behind the Gare Saint- Lazare, Paris,* Gelatin silver print, 1932, https://library-artstor-org.proxy.ulib.uits.iu.edu/#/asset/AMAGNUMIG_10311565140.

Figure 3, Sugimoto, Hiroshi, *Manatee*, Gelatin silver print, 1994, (The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/261660/hiroshi-sugimoto-manatee-japanese-1994/?dz=0.4991,0.2260,1.38.

Figure 4, Sugimoto, Hiroshi, *Birds of South Georgia*, Gelatin silver print, 2012, (Apollo Magazine), https://www.apollo-magazine.com/seeing-like-camera-hiroshi-sugimoto/.

Figure 5, *King Penguins,* photograph of exhibit, (American Museum of Natural History), https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/birds-of-the-world/king-penguins.

Figure 6. Sugimoto, Hiroshi. *Permian Land.* 1992. ArtStack. http://40.114.5.22/artist/hiroshi-sugimoto-shan-ben-bo-si/permian-land. Web. 20 Apr. 2019.

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